

TRACI SKUCE

## HUNGER MOON

YOU FOLLOW FOSTER through the side door. He chucks his jacket and gym bag onto a row of boots, taking down a pair of salt-stained lace-ups. You attempt to hang your jean jacket on one of seven hooks bulging with coats. It skims into a gritty puddle. Second go around and Foster's laughing, saying, "Just throw it anywhere, man." But you're persistent and, finally, with some rearranging, it stays put over a trench coat and rain poncho.

Then you kick off your high-tops, only a couple months old and already too small. You won't report this to your mother, not until your feet bleed or she's better, back at work. *Oh great*. There's your big toe. Jabbing right through the fresh hole in your sock. Goddamn. Somewhere between wearing shoes all day and removing them, it's happened: your feet have taken on another centimetre.

You are like the fucking universe, expanding.

Or like that kid with a messed up gene. The one you read about, his DNA gone haywire, pumping out signals to never stop growing. At sixteen, the guy's legs were so long he had to remove the driver's seat of a Volkswagen Golf just to work the pedals. And still he had to bend his neck funny to peer out the windshield. He's probably eight feet by now or exploded right out of his skin. That could happen to you. It is happening. Every night you feel bone-splintering pain, as though tiny people are scaling your shin bones with crampons and pick axes.

Now your stomach groans. Foster's mom peeks around the partition wall, says, "Derek, I thought it was you." She folds her arms, flicks out the filter of an unlit cigarette with her thumbnail. She's wearing a fuzzy teal sweater that gives her an out-of-focus look, especially with her smudgy green eyeliner.

Foster runs past her, does a sock slide across the kitchen floor, right to the fridge. "You hungry, man?" he says.

You're never *not* hungry.

When you step into the kitchen, Foster's mom tugs your sleeve, says, "Jesus, Derek. You join the basketball team yet?"

"It's not really my thing," you say. Every other person is disappointed you don't put your height to good use. Especially your dad who, when not in the Caribbean with his new girlfriend, hassles you to try out for volleyball or "B-ball" like he did. He's always recounting his glory years, captain of this and that, telling you about cheerleaders he handpicked and dated.

Foster's mom says, "What is your thing, Derek?" You shrug, mumble something about guitar, though you only play an A chord and a G. She places the unlit cigarette in her mouth and opens the oven. It smells of lasagna. "You staying?" she says.

For the past two months, you've eaten mostly grilled cheese sandwiches, Doritos, cereal and bags of deli corned beef. Occasionally, your mom's friend Evelyn drops off a casserole or a pot of chili, something your mom cries over, thanks her for and doesn't touch. Supper you and your brother eat for two or three days in a row.

Your stomach groans again and you say yes to Foster's mom.

"Yes *please*," says Foster and crams a Kraft single into his mouth.

"Hollow legs," his mom says, turning oven knobs. "The both of you." She lights her cigarette, coughs, smiles. "Four o'clock," she says. "Oprah." Disappears toward the TV room, feet shuffling in slippers that look like mini sleeping bags.

Since she's pretty much bedridden, your mom watches Oprah on an old black-and-white TV. She has lupus. New to her, to all of you. She's in the midst of a flare, every joint swollen and sore, her mouth full of cankers, hair falling out in clumps. According to her doctor, it's preying on her kidneys. She swallows pills that bloat her face, make her look like someone else's mother.

You keep thinking one day you'll wake up and she'll be normal again. That she'll be chopping carrots for stew or scraping paint off the tallboy in the middle of the dining room or rushing to work in her white sneakers. You keep waiting for her to use that jokey voice, the one like a secret code between you. Instead she asks you to sit on the rocker beside her bed, the lights dim because of her headaches. She says, "Derek, this isn't how it should be for you. It isn't." Her voice thin, like an echo, like a sound lifting out of a deep and lonely hole.

There's hope though, now. A friend of a friend of a friend found Longwei, a Chinese doctor with a reputation for miracles. For the past two

Tuesdays and Thursdays he's knocked on the door, told you in broken English you're too tall, then handed you a paper sac stuffed with dusty herbs. First day he showed you how to simmer them gently until the water transformed into a black potion. "To tonify kidneys," he said. Then there's the *chi*. Longwei says your mom's is stagnant. You have no idea what chi is, but you've watched him encourage it, waving burning sticks over her wrists, inserting needles and twisting them deep into her joints.

Foster's going triple-decker with the sandwiches. "Toothpicks, toothpicks," he says, chomping on a piece of ham, opening every drawer. "Like at Yitz's, you know? Olives and fucking toothpicks." You jam your fingers into the olive jar, fish around until Foster slaps your hand. You flick olive juice at him, and he whips you with a tea towel. One giant step and you're out of reach, twisting the egg timer by the stove to sixty.

You really should call your mom. She's always saying, "At least do me that courtesy, Derek. Otherwise, I'm thinking ditch." Probably Longwei is with her, or Oprah; probably she isn't worried about you at only four in the afternoon.

"Mustard?" Foster says, clinking a knife against a jar.

You say sure, sure, then you're over in what Foster's family calls the Nook. It's more of an eatery, where you've had freshly squeezed OJ and baskets of croissants, where Foster's parents spend most Sundays smoking, drinking espresso, and filling in *The Globe and Mail* crossword. This house has other luxuries: a wide staircase, a mini-gym in the basement, a solarium. None of your other friends even know what a solarium is.

Frozen rain taps the sliding glass. Outside the sky is an indecisive blue-grey. And the pool, covered in an undulating blue blanket and crusty mounds of snow, is nothing like last summer at Foster's pool party. That's when you were making out with Jaime Harris under the diving board. One hand gripping the ledge, other hand, roaming. You would've slipped it beneath the bra part of her bikini but Foster charged overhead, canon-balled into the water. Jaime sputtered, submerged and disappeared, swam wide frog strokes along the bottom. Now chickadees drop from bare branches, peck at a smattering of seed, and no one's making out with anybody.

Foster's sister, Meg, appears, reflected in the glass, a smear of white and powder blue. You turn around and your heart plunges a little, though you wish it wouldn't. She's fourteen to your eighteen, wears turtlenecks and

sweatpants, school mascot on the bum. Not sexy at all like Jaime. But there's something. The theatrical fedora, brim casting blue over her face. The spin and moonwalk, half Michael Jackson, half *Flashdance*. You shove your hands into your pocket, concealing your boner. Plop into the nearest chair.

She tosses the hat, which lands over the cat dish, and laughs. Straightens her glasses, her spine and salutes you. "Hello Derek. Howst art thou?"

"Stop it with the fucking Shakespeare," Foster says.

To Foster, she says, "Excusez-moi" and hip-checks him away from the fridge. To you, she says, "Do you know *Antony and Cleopatra*?" But you don't. She's playing Antony's daughter in an amateur production; she has one line.

"One word, more like it." Foster peels four slices of bacon from a pack, sticks them on a paper towel and into the microwave.

"One word. One line. Same same." She displays a container, does a pli . "Fruit-bottomed yogurt, anyone?"

The microwave whirs and Foster butchers a watery tomato. "Yeah, and we had to sit through five hours of *thou* and *art* and shit, and all she said was *Father!*" His voice rises in girlish pitch, tomato dripping from his fingers, and you know he'll never not go to his sister's plays.

Years ago, she lost her eye. Foster's fault: he lobbed a snowball, aimed at his buddy, packed around rock and ice. It caught Meg instead, ruptured the vitris humours, inside liquid of the eye leaking out. He's told you the story a couple times and once, when you were both high as shit, he brought you into her room, tiptoeing to the dresser, where he opened a plastic container and her eye stared up at you. At first, you both laughed your asses off. The weirdness of a disembodied eye. Then he dumped it onto your palm and you went on and on about how you thought it'd be a sphere and it totally wasn't. More like a fried egg. It felt strangely cool and you imagined her sliding it through the socket, positioning it like a board behind a broken window.

You always forget which one is the fake.

And now she joins you in the Nook, straight hair staticky from her hat. She's eating from the yogurt container, licking her spoon, asking if you've ever seen a lunar eclipse.

You pick the dried petals off a potted African violet, rub them until they are dust. Tell her about the solar eclipse, the grade six art class where you cut out cardboard, glued tinfoil, designed special viewing devices. You tell her how your mom shut the curtains so your brother wouldn't sear his retina and you stood at the bathroom window, door locked, device pointed

at the sky. The thing didn't work. Biggest celestial event of your life, and it didn't work.

"That's too bad," says Meg. "Tonight's the lunar. No special device required. Only clouds are in the way." She lowers the right eye, obvious now it's the living one, and you study the left, the way it stays wide, doesn't move at all.

She's scooting a chair closer to you, warmish and girl-fragrant, and you can't remember when you started to notice-*notice* her. Maybe by the auditorium doors at school, hanging out with the other drama kids. Or the cumulative days you've spent watching *Star Trek* with Foster, Meg curled on the saucer chair. It doesn't matter, because all you know is you want to place her whole and pure in your mouth. "Meg," you whisper, not really meaning to, but she's heard you and says your name with a big fat question mark. You clear your throat, shift over, knock your knee and ignore the pain. In that stupid Shakespeare voice you say, "Thine mother. She callst thou."

She laughs, shakes her head, and starts orbiting the yogurt container around the African violet, salt shaker around the container and explains the Earth's shadows. Surreptitiously, you close your left eye. You do this sometimes in class or lying in bed or walking alone. Here in your periphery is her wrist, the revolving Earth, but beyond it's a black border. When you open your eye again, her elbow and shoulder come back, wisps of hair. Sun and moon.

Then Foster delivers your sandwich on a plate, cut into triangles, olive on each section, speared with toothpicks. Three bites in, your tongue prickles with heat. Four and your head is on fire. "What the fuck—" you say.

Meg giggles, fetches you water. It helps for a moment, then doesn't. Foster shrugs, takes another bite.

"Foster?" Meg says. "Did you use the spicy mustard?"

"And the jalapeno!" He laughs like a maniacal cartoon bad guy, a class-A asshole. "Not to mention the banana peppers."

Meg slides the yogurt your way. "Try this," she says. "It's better than water."

Once the heat tempers, you're upstairs sprawled over Foster's futon. It's on the floor, like yours. Yours used to be in a frame but you outgrew it and now sleep diagonally, feet hanging off the end. Your mom once said it made your basement room *college-ready*, along with the too-low ceiling and milk crates for books. Never mind your grades have tanked. Never mind you won't be going to college or anywhere.

Foster starts up *Dark Side of the Moon*, volume low. The only album he plays these days. He hooks up the Nintendo console and turns the TV to its blue screen. Close to the bed are coins scattered across a fat dictionary. You pick up a fifty-cent piece, roll it from finger to finger, one of the few party tricks you're actually good at. Foster places a charred roach on the window sill, opens the window so that cold air pushes in. He's on and on about dropping acid tomorrow night, tripping out at the Laser Floyd show. You steady the coin on your thumb toss it into the air, catch it and slap it on your hand. Heads. You think about the weight of Meg's hand, placed on your shoulder as you slurped her yogurt. About how she daubed the sweat off your forehead as though sponge painting. About her easy laugh. Her eye. You ask if she can come too.

Foster snatches the roach. "What the fuck, man? Laser fucking Floyd?"

The coin slips to the floor. If Foster actually knew you wanted to hold his sister—just for a minute—and sniff her hair, if he knew you wanted to talk about eclipses and black holes, he'd pummel you. *Pummel*. So you back track, remind him there's a Meg in Calculus, the girl who always wears braids.

"You mean Marsha?" he says, leaning against the radiator, patting pockets for a lighter.

"Yeah, exactly," you say.

"Invite her if you want," he says, and you know he doesn't believe you.

You reorganize the coins into a pyramid, then a circle. Foster leans against the radiator, sending you a sideways scowl. You feel like your own understudy, the fool who doesn't know his lines. You shouldn't be thinking about Meg as anyone but your friend's kid sister. And you certainly shouldn't ask to invite her along. But somewhere in the past months the real you's gone AWOL. Detached like a rocket booster and burning away in the stratosphere of your future. Meanwhile you're just an asshole fumbling through the present, dividing coins into copper and silver, hoping Foster will forget about it and light the fucking roach.

You move to the window where a few needles of freezing rain prick into your back. Heat rises from the radiator, burning your ass. Foster drops the roach into a film canister, seals the lid and shakes. He squints and swivels his stout body, first away from you, then toward and his spine snap-crackles all the way up. And maybe as a diversion or because you haven't talked about it with anyone, not even your brother, you're telling him about your mom, about Longwei and chi, the needles and a meridian called the Gushing Spring.

You knock your knuckles against your teeth, scanning the three posters on Foster's walls: Toronto Argos, Toronto Blue Jays, L.A. Kings. You say your mom's never been this sick. *Never*. Claire Torry's voice wheels from the speakers and around the room in its exquisite torture, and when it peaks, Foster lights the roach. "Shit, man," he says, his chest puffed. He exhales. Passes the stubby remains over to you.

When you sit down for dinner in the Nook, the rain, though less insistent, still patters against the sliding-glass doors. It's dark now. One light hangs over the table, spreading its yellow over the bubbling lasagna. Everything's mirrored in the dark glass. Foster's mom tongs salad onto her plate, encourages you to take multiple helpings. You start with two.

Meg forks away the top layer of pasta and slices it, then sets her cutlery across the plate. "Pass the parma," she says, and you slide over the shaker. She opens it and powders her food, and you watch how the eyelid over the prosthetic is broad, almost bulging, as she focuses on her task. You want to touch it. Trace the eyelid, circle the iris, tap the black pupil and look behind it. She catches you staring and you flash an apologetic smile, shovel in another bite.

"Did Foster mention my telescope?" she says. "Views aren't great from the city. Too much light pollution." She tsks and shakes her head. "Next summer Foster's taking me north for meteor showers. Aren't you Foster?"

Foster grunts and stabs at his croutons.

You're wondering if she's always aware of the emptiness behind her eye, the way you're always aware of hunger. Or if it's different, if it's like a blank wall she turns into and away from, all the time.

Her fork clatters and drops to the floor; she claps her hands together. "Do you hear that?" You stop chewing, and everyone hunches forward, straining to listen. The rain has stopped. Meg rushes the window and, framing her face, presses into it. Her breath fogs the glass and she looks like a kid waiting for Santa or praying to God. Then her shoulders drop and she draws an x in the condensation. She sits back down with a pout. "Still cloudy," she says.

"Maybe it'll clear," you say. And you wish you could offer her hope. More than hope. A guarantee that when the time comes, this close to midnight, she'll be able to see it.

"Yeah," Meg says, picking up her fork. "Maybe."

Hours later, you're walking away from Foster's listening to the ice-coated branches tinkle, someone's heat pump kicking on. You expect hunger to hollow you out, thighbones to toes, belly to throat, but there's only the pleasant gurgle of digesting. You slip-slide toward the corner, tramp over hard-packed snow banks, briefly nostalgic for the tunnel networks you and your mom and brother used to dig. You pause under a cone of orange streetlight, cold rising through your canvas shoes, glazing the one big toe. A raccoon humps diagonally across the street, lifts onto hind legs at the stop sign, and casts its metallic gaze toward you.

It's then you realize that you never called your mom, that you're half-high, and a James Bond flick later than you meant to be. She's probably in and out of sleep, listening for you. You wish there were a phone in your pocket. But that's way off in the future, along with the day you finally stop growing, reaching six-eight. There will be other days between now and then, like the one where your mom dies, not of lupus, but a cancer so rare doctors hardly know about it. A cancer without any miracles.

And there's the day, years after that, when you'll meet Meg in Vancouver, a place you'll have lived for a decade. She'll play Portia in an underfunded production of *Twelfth Night* and it'll take you half the play to recognize her. But you will recognize her, and you'll send your girlfriend home while you go backstage. Seeing Meg will feel like a homecoming and you won't want to not see her again. You'll attend the play three times, hanging out backstage afterwards to drink wine and talk and laugh. Then, on that forth night, the understudy will play Portia and no one will be able to tell you where Meg is.

As you move through the side streets now, the houses return to normal size. Some curtains are open, families watching TV, reading in winged-back chairs. You're cold and getting colder and wish you had a teletransporter or a jet pack, but these won't exist in anybody's future.

When you approach the Jewish cemetery, heading west, the frozen rain falls again, needles into your ear and down the back of your neck. It gains speed. You squint through the silver lines, your strides wider than sidewalk squares. And you've completely forgotten that right now, above the clouds, the Earth's shadow is rolling over, eclipsing the moon.